



# YOUTH AND ALCOHOL



**Drug Free Kids Canada** Where families come for help

---

*“Canadians are unfortunately not paying enough attention to the harms of alcohol.”*

– Dr. Theresa Tam, Chief Public Health Officer, 2018

---

The media is filled with the issues surrounding youth and substance use. Canada’s opioid crisis, the tragic effects of accidental overdose, fentanyl in street drugs, the surprising growth of popularity of vaping among youth, the normalization of cannabis consumption and the pending legislation of new cannabis products; these are all topics that may preoccupy us as parents and caregivers.

**Let’s not forget about alcohol.** Did you know that alcohol is still the most commonly used substance in Canada? Alcohol is a socially accepted part of our everyday life – the majority of adults drink alcohol. It is important for us as parents to understand more about alcohol and its effects on physical and mental health, especially because young people who drink are particularly at risk.

You are one of the most powerful influences in your child’s life, and having thoughtful conversations about alcohol use with your pre-teen or teen can help them make informed and healthy choices.

## Underage Drinking is very common in Canada.

Close to 80% of young Canadians 15 years and older have reported drinking alcohol during the past year. It is the substance that the majority of young people in grades 7 through 12 will try first.<sup>1</sup>

According to the 2016-2017 Canadian Student Tobacco, Alcohol and Drugs Survey:<sup>2</sup>

- The average age of initiation for alcohol is 13 years old.
- More than 44% of students in grades 7 to 12 reported consuming an alcoholic beverage in the past 12 months. That statistic rises to 64.5 percent of grade 10 – 12 students.
- Almost 25% of students in grades 7-12 exhibited high risk drinking behaviour (5 or more drinks on a single occasion) rising to nearly 40% of grade 10- 12 students drinking more than 5 drinks on a single occasion.

### THERE ARE MANY REASONS THAT A TEEN MIGHT DECIDE TO DRINK ALCOHOL

Adolescence is an exciting time, but it can also be a time where peer pressure, boredom, risk taking and the need to ‘fit in’ become important factors in a teenager’s life. Sometimes the opinions and actions of your teen’s friends matter more to them than yours.

Young people may drink because they may feel a need to fit in, to be like their friends or older siblings, or because they may see it happening all around them, on social media or at parties. They may be copying your drinking habits, or they may use alcohol to help them relax, or deal with stress or anxiety they may feel.

Drinking patterns established during adolescence are important predictors of future drinking patterns and their impacts in adulthood. In other words, the younger a person starts drinking, the higher the risk for poor health and problems related to alcohol consumption later in life.<sup>3</sup>

## What are the Risks of Alcohol Consumption for Youth?

Alcohol is a depressant that slows the functioning of the central nervous system, including the brain.

Young people are at a higher risk for negative impacts from drinking alcohol because the executive functions in the teenage brain such as decision-making, motivation, emotion, reward and risk taking behaviours are not yet fully developed and will not be until their mid twenties.

Young people are also vulnerable to alcohol-induced brain damage, which could contribute to poor performance at school or work.<sup>4</sup>

### SHORT TERM RISKS:

When young people over-consume alcohol, they are at short-term risk for accidental injury, alcohol poisoning and motor vehicle crashes. While intoxicated, they may be more vulnerable to assaults, sexual coercion and mental health issues such as depression and self harm, because alcohol impairs judgment, reasoning and the ability to evaluate risk.<sup>5</sup>

### LONG TERM RISKS

Frequent or regular alcohol use has an impact on the physical health and mental well being of everyone, including youth.

Long-term harms of excessive alcohol use include substance use disorders, learning and memory issues, problems with school performance, increased risk of school dropout, and increased risk for certain chronic diseases, such as liver disease, stroke and cancer.<sup>6</sup>

### ALCOHOL AND DRIVING

Despite decades of public awareness campaigns, drunk driving remains a serious issue. Road crashes are the number one cause of death among young people in Canada.

Alcohol:<sup>7</sup>

- Blunts alertness and reduces motor co-ordination
- Slows down reaction time and interferes with judgment
- Impairs vision and depth perception

Motor vehicle accidents are the leading cause of death among 16 to 25 year olds, and alcohol and/or drug impairment is a factor in 55% of those crashes.<sup>8</sup>

It's important to emphasize that while youth are significantly overrepresented in alcohol-related deaths as the drivers, they are overrepresented to an even greater extent as passengers.

*15.3% of students surveyed by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health reported being a passenger in a car driven by a drunk driver and 12.3% reported riding in a vehicle driven by someone who had been using drugs.<sup>9</sup>*

Youth who consume alcohol (with or without other drugs) need to understand that their ability to drive will be significantly impaired. An impaired driver puts themselves and everyone else on the road in danger including their passengers, cyclists, other drivers and pedestrians.

## PURIFIED ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES

Of particular concern is the consumption of single-serve flavoured, purified alcoholic beverages, such as coolers. These drinks usually contain high alcohol content and are highly sweetened, masking the signs of overconsumption. Some of these single serving beverages actually contain the same alcoholic content as four standard alcoholic drinks. The effects may not be felt immediately, increasing the chances of overconsumption.

A single serve purified alcoholic beverage could be enough to severely intoxicate a youth, and two of these drinks could lead to hospitalization, with even a risk of death.<sup>10</sup>

There are regulations that restrict the amount of alcohol in single-serve containers of flavoured purified alcoholic beverages. These regulations are intended to protect Canadians, in particular youth, from the immediate risks posed by these beverages, including unintentional overconsumption and acute alcohol poisoning.<sup>11</sup>



## MIXING ALCOHOL WITH OTHER DRUGS

**Alcohol should never be combined with any other drug.<sup>12</sup>**

When alcohol is mixed with other drugs, such as prescription and over the counter medications, recreational cannabis products, illegal drugs and energy drinks, the resulting effects can be highly unpredictable. Alcohol may make the other drug ineffective, or it may increase the effect of the other drug to the point where it could cause serious harm. Other substances can also mask the effects of alcohol, which can lead to overconsumption.

## BINGE DRINKING

Binge drinking means having many drinks on one occasion. Drinking to get very drunk increases the risk of safety and health issues in youth, including but not limited to;<sup>13</sup>

- Getting into a fight or being assaulted
- Having unwanted sex or pushing unwanted sex on others
- Developing or worsening depression, anxiety and other mental health problems
- Having blackouts (when you lose all memory of where you were and what you did when you were drunk)
- Seeing suicide as a way out when you are feeling down
- Getting injured or killed while driving, biking, boating, snowmobiling, walking or being a passenger
- Getting injured or killed from a fall, drowning or fire
- Getting sick and possibly dying from alcohol poisoning
- Choking on your own vomit (which can kill you if you are passed out)
- Going into respiratory arrest (meaning you stop breathing).

Over a longer term, repeated binge drinking can also increase the risk of:

- Damage to your stomach, pancreas, liver and brain
- Developing cancer
- Developing an addiction to alcohol.
- Binge drinking also increases your risk of arrest and other legal problems.

## ALCOHOL OVERDOSE

An alcohol overdose can happen to anyone who consumes alcohol too quickly. Teenagers and young adults who binge drink may be at particular risk.

An alcohol overdose can happen when there is so much alcohol in the bloodstream that the areas of the brain controlling basic life-support functions — such as breathing, heart rate, and temperature control — begin to shut down.

### Critical Signs and Symptoms of an Alcohol Overdose

- Mental confusion, stupor
- Vomiting
- Slow breathing (fewer than 8 breaths per minute)
- Slow heart rate
- Dulled responses, such as no gag reflex
- Difficulty remaining conscious, or inability to wake up
- Seizures
- Irregular breathing (10 seconds or more between breaths)
- Clammy skin
- Extremely low body temperature, bluish skin color, or paleness (which prevents choking)

**Alcohol overdose can lead to permanent brain damage or death.<sup>14</sup>**

**Know the Danger Signs and Act Quickly:** Don't play doctor - cold showers, hot coffee, or walking it off do not reverse alcohol overdose - **Call 911 immediately.**

### Understanding the dangers of Alcohol Overdose

# What can I do to Protect my Children?

## PROTECTIVE FACTORS

There is growing evidence that protective factors, such as being connected to community and school, positive relationships with caring adults both within and outside of the family and supportive peers can all enhance coping strategies that deal with issues such as peer pressure, anxiety, self esteem and the need to 'fit in.' These connections can reduce the risks associated with problematic substance use, including alcohol.<sup>15</sup>

## UNDERSTANDING LOW RISK ALCOHOL DRINKING GUIDELINES

In 2023, after two years of research, The Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction revised their established low-risk alcohol drinking guidelines. [Canada's new Guidance on Alcohol and Health](#) contains a continuum of health risks that are associated with weekly alcohol use.

The revised [Drinking Less is Better](#) is designed to help people make more informed choices about alcohol use. It's a good idea to go over these [new alcohol risk guidelines](#) with your child.

## WHAT IS A STANDARD DRINK SIZE ?

Many young people simply do not know what the standard alcoholic amounts in various beverages represent.

The infographic defines a standard drink size for four types of beverages. It features icons for each: a beer mug, a bottle, a wine glass, and a shot glass. The text is as follows:

Beverage	Volume	Alcohol Content
Beer	341 ml (12 oz.)	5% alcohol content
Cider/Cooler	341 ml (12 oz.)	5% alcohol content
Wine	142 ml (5 oz.)	12% alcohol content
Distilled Alcohol (rye, gin, rum, etc.)	43 ml (1.5 oz.)	40% alcohol content

© Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction, 2018

\* Reproduced with permission from the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction.

## TALK ABOUT ALCOHOL WITH YOUR CHILD - EARLY AND OFTEN

Many young people don't really understand the potential risks involved with alcohol and other drugs. As a parent or caregiver, being informed about alcohol and its effects on youth can help you to initiate early, open and honest conversations with your pre-teens and teens. Balanced conversations about alcohol can have a positive impact on the choices young people make as they grow into adulthood, and help them to make responsible decisions about its use.

# Getting the Conversation Started

Here are some tips that might help you as you engage with your children about important topics such as alcohol and other drugs:

- **Pick the right time.** Ask your child if this is a good time to talk. If you get a clearly negative response, shut it down and try again at another time - but don't give up!
- **Talk, and listen.** Remember, conversations are two-way discussions that communicate back and forth, not lectures.
- **Try to remain non-judgmental and calm.** It's important to help your child understand that you care about them and that you are there to learn what they know about alcohol (and other drugs), and you want to work together with them to keep those lines of communication open.
- **Address adult alcohol consumption.** If your child mentions that they have seen you drink and you seem fine, explain that as an adult, you have the ability to make choices that are not only legal but also informed. Explain that consuming alcohol irresponsibly or heavily during their early teen years can increase risk levels for their physical and emotional health.
- **Make use of incidental learning opportunities:** Sometimes someone in the community or an admired celebrity encounters a problem that is alcohol related, this can be an opportunity to initiate a conversation.



## Try active listening:

- Find a comfortable spot for both of you without distractions such as cell phones, television or any other media devices.
  - Face each other.
  - Use non-threatening body language
  - Nod, ask questions and repeat what you are hearing so they know you are listening.
- **Express your concerns** about underage alcohol use and what course of action you believe in when it comes to using alcohol. Explain that your opinions may differ from theirs and you realize that whether to drink or not will ultimately be a choice they make.
  - **Be firm about never driving impaired or being in a car with an impaired driver.** Explain that if your child finds themselves in a position where they are uncomfortable about alcohol consumption at a party, a friend's house, or an activity, they can call you anytime. Remind them that this is particularly important when someone is drinking or using drugs and then offer to drive him or her home, or make a plan to get them home safely. Agree on a code word, and explain you will be proud of them for the call, even if it's in the middle of the night.
  - **Congratulate your child for their honesty and openness.** Young people love to hear that their parents and significant adults in their lives respect, trust and love them unconditionally.

## What to Say



**Here are some neutral, open - ended questions you can try that will help to take the focus away from blame or doubt:**

- *"Have you ever heard of someone needing medical attention after drinking? Why do you think this might happen?"*
- *"I read that some kids think that drinking coolers is less dangerous than drinking beer or shots. Do you think that is true?" "Do you think kids your age know the levels of alcohol in different drinks?"*
- *"Do you think that some kids your age might get into a car with a driver who is impaired by alcohol or any other drug? Why do you think they might do that?" "Do you know that I will always help you plan to get home safely even if you've been drinking – no questions asked?"*
- *"Which do you think is more dangerous? Driving after drinking alcohol or driving after using pot?"*
- *"Where do kids your age learn about alcohol and other drugs? Do you think it is reliable information? Why do you think that?"*
- *"Did you know there are new alcohol and health guidelines?"*
- *"Have you heard about binge drinking?" "Have you ever felt pressured to drink too much?"*

Sharing your time with your pre-teen or teen and searching for relevant information about alcohol and youth, mixing alcohol with other drugs, impaired driving and other alcohol related topics together can help to create and maintain a bond of trust and respect between you.

---

*" Families, friends, and all Canadians who care for or work with youth can play a positive role if they recognize their influence on youth's drinking patterns and support their healthy physical, mental and emotional development." – Dr. Tam, Chief Public Health Officer*

---



Alcohol consumption is heavily ingrained in our culture, and chances are your teen has already tried a beer, or something stronger. Even though you might prefer they wait until they're older to start the conversation, now is the time to discuss their alcohol use with them, calmly and in an informed way. Remind them that if they ever get into a difficult or risky situation because of alcohol, you will be there for them.

Share and discuss [Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health](#) with your teen, and ask them if they feel it's something they can follow.

You may also wish to point out that there are responsible ways of consuming alcohol which can reduce the potential harms of over-consumption: Never getting behind the wheel while drunk; never getting into a car with a person who has been drinking; avoiding binge drinking; and never mixing alcohol with other drugs are all ways your child can reduce their risk. Discuss these safer ways to consume alcohol without judgment or blame. Being open to discussing alcohol use with your teen can make it easier for them to approach you if they ever feel their consumption has gotten out of control. Keep talking, and together you can take steps to get them the help they might need.

**You've got this!** The bottom line is that you know the kids in your life better than anyone else. By informing yourself about alcohol, and by learning how to engage with your pre-teen or teen in the conversation, you will have the right tools to keep those important lines of communication open, helping your child to make their own responsible and healthy choices as they grow. **We're here to help.**




## HERE ARE SOME ADDITIONAL RESOURCES THAT CAN HELP INFORM YOU AND YOUR TEEN ABOUT ALCOHOL;

- [Centre for Addiction and Mental Health \(CAMH\)](#)
- [Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction \(CCSA\)](#)
- [DrinkSmart](#)

**DRUG  
FREE  
KIDS**  
CANADA.ORG

**D**



Whenever you decide to talk about drugs with your pre-teen or teen, it's important to remind your child that their body and their future belong to them - and that you are always there to talk with them about any issues or concerns they might have.

Share and discuss  
**Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health**  
research with your teen,  
and ask them if they feel it's something they can follow.

For more information on drugs, their effects on youth, how to intervene if your child is using, and how you, as the parent can protect your child from harm, please go to our website:

**[drugfreekidscanada.org](http://drugfreekidscanada.org)**